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The Canon and the Codex: On the Material Form of the Christian Bible

FRANCIS WATSON

“All scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...” (2 Tim.3.16). This text has featured prominently in modern conservative attempts to formulate an appropriate doctrine of scripture – that is, an account of the role of the canonical texts within the divine economy. The decision to highlight this particular text reflects the assumption that the concept of *inspiration* lies at the heart of any doctrine of scripture. The text also hints at a pragmatic dimension: the inspiredness of the holy scriptures comes to light as and when they prove fruitful in shaping authentic Christian living.

If God is the inspirer of scripture, that does not make God scripture’s author. With the sole exception of the stone tablets inscribed by the divine finger, the biblical God never writes anything. Writing is a human activity, dependent not only on a writer’s skilful manipulation of shared communicative conventions but also on the materiality of pen, ink, and the book. There is no reason to suppose that the spirituality and materiality of the biblical text are in tension with one another. Yet it is *prima facie* likely that the use of the inspired text will be determined in part by its physical format, as roll or codex. That at least is the working hypothesis of the present paper, which takes its cue from another text in 2 Timothy:

When you come, bring the cloak I left with Carpus at Troas, and also the books, especially the parchments. (2 Tim.4.13)

1. Paul and his Books

Towards the end of his second letter, Paul (the fictive author) appeals to Timothy to visit him as soon as possible, preferably before winter makes travelling difficult (2 Tim.4.9, 21).¹ Paul himself is in Rome and in chains, nearing the end of his life: “The time of my departure has come” (4.6). Apart from Luke, his closest friends and fellow-workers are all elsewhere (4.9-12, 20). Local Christians have failed to support him, although he passes on their greetings (4.16, 21). Timothy may still be in Ephesus. In the previous letter he was instructed to remain there in order to combat the “myths and endless genealogies” promoted by the teachers of a “knowledge falsely so-called” (1 Tim.1.3; 6.20). But now he is to travel to Rome to provide the lonely apostle with companionship during his last days. En route he is asked to collect Paul’s cloak and books from Carpus in Troas (2 Tim.4.13). A reference follows to one “Alexander the coppersmith” who, it is said “fiercely opposed our message” and “did me great harm” (4.14-15). Perhaps we are to imagine that Alexander’s hostility had forced Paul to leave Troas in a hurry, with no time even to collect his precious cloak and books from his lodgings. Now he wants them back. In revisiting Troas to collect them, Timothy should himself beware of the malevolent coppersmith – a dangerous opponent who recalls the figure of Demetrius the Ephesian silversmith, whose business was undermined by the Christian gospel and who mobilized public opinion in defence of the goddess Artemis (Acts 19.23-41).

Timothy is to collect “the books [*ta biblia*], especially the parchments [*tas membranas*].” Evidently the parchments form a subset within the wider category of the book; these are the texts that Paul is most anxious to retrieve and that Timothy should prioritize as he attempts to transport the entire library from Troas to Rome. How are these “parchments” differentiated from the other books, and why are they so uniquely valuable?²

We might suppose it is their physical composition that differentiates these *membranai* from the other *biblia*. The *membranai* have been manufactured out of animal hides, in distinction perhaps from books written on papyrus (*chartēs*). The anonymous author of the Johannine epistles speaks of writing on papyrus with ink and pen (2 Jn.12; 3 Jn.13). It may be that Paul values his parchment books still more than his papyrus ones. This seems unlikely,

¹ On the authorship issue, see I. H. Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ICC, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999, pp. 57-92. A possible second century context in conflict over the Pauline heritage is proposed by D. R. MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983.

² According to T. C. Skeat, *malista* here does not mean “especially” but introduces a definition: “... the books, that is, the parchments” (“Especially the Parchments: A Note on 2 Timothy iv.13”, *JTS* 30 [1979], pp. 173-77). The use of *malista* elsewhere in the Pastorals (1 Tim.4.10, 5.17; Tit.1.10) provides no clear support for Skeat’s claim. Even if it is correct, the present argument would not be materially affected.

however. Parchment is not inherently more valuable than papyrus. In economic terms it has the advantage that it can be manufactured locally and does not need to be imported from Egypt. If parchment seems to us to speak of a medium used only for precious and revered texts, that was not the case in the ancient world. A contrast between two writing media – parchment and papyrus – would be out of place here. An explanation for Paul’s distinction must be sought elsewhere.

A fifth century commentator on this passage, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, notes that the term *membrana* is a Latin loanword and suggests that the apostle uses it here to refer to scriptural rolls:

He calls rolls *membranai*, for that is the term the Romans use for “skins”. In earlier times the divine scripture used to be contained in rolls [*heilēta*], as indeed they still are among the Jews.³

On Theodoret’s interpretation Paul is especially anxious to retrieve his “parchments” from Carpus of Troas because these are his copies of scriptural texts, formatted as rolls in the traditional Jewish manner. For Theodoret’s readers, scriptural texts are familiar in the codex format still preserved in the modern printed book. Jews and Christians share much of the same scripture, but in different formats: a copy of the Book of Isaiah intended for Christian use will normally be easy to differentiate from its Jewish counterpart, for one will be a codex, the other a roll.⁴ Theodoret is aware that the roll format is the ancient one and that the Christian scriptural codex is an innovation, and he therefore assumes that Paul’s highly valued *membranai* are scriptural rolls that predate the early Christian shift to the codex. If the *membranai* are rolls, the non-scriptural *biblia* that Paul also wants back are presumably codices. In Theodoret’s time the codex format is in regular use for all kinds of literature, and there is no difficulty in supposing that the apostle possessed non-scriptural codices as well as traditional scriptural rolls.

Theodoret’s explanation of the highly valued *membranai* fails to account for the use of a Latin loanword to refer to Jewish rolls. The significance of the Latin term is rightly noted by the papyrologists C. H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat in their groundbreaking book, *The Birth of*

³ Theodoret, *Commentarius in omnes sancti Pauli epistolas*, PG 82.853.

⁴ In Luke 4.17, where Jesus is said to “unroll” the book of Isaiah” (*anaptuxas*), a textual variant has him simply “open” it (*anoixas*). The variant replaces a Jewish roll with a Christian codex.

the Codex (1987).⁵ According to Roberts and Skeat, contemporary usage shows that *membranai* must refer not to Jewish scriptural rolls but to a parchment codex, that is, a book divided into separate sheets bound together at the fold. Paul's *membranai* are codices rather than rolls as Theodoret supposed. Indeed, since the plural seems to refer to the separate pieces of skin that constitute the pages of a codex, it may be that Paul has in mind a single codex rather than codices in the plural. His other *biblia*, differentiated from his codex or codices, must be rolls. Paul is anxious to recover all of his books, but he is especially concerned about the codices – scriptural or otherwise – rather than the rolls.

In favouring the codex above the roll, the Paul of the Pastoral Epistles is in line with broader trends of Christian book production during the early centuries. Of extant Greek Old Testament manuscripts thought to predate the fourth century, around 43 derive from codices, 17 from rolls.⁶ Of these 17 rolls, 10 are dated from prior to the Christian era and so are clearly Jewish; some or all of the later rolls may also have a Jewish origin. Christian scribal conventions confirm that almost all the 43 codices are Christian. Most seem to have contained a single scriptural book, with Genesis (6 codices), Exodus (5), Psalms (8) and Isaiah (4) proving the most popular. As for the books of the New Testament, there are 39 partially extant second or third century codices, but no rolls. The four gospels account for 22 of the 39 codices, with one text (P⁴⁵) containing all four gospels and Acts, others containing Matthew and Luke (P⁶⁴+P⁶⁷+ P⁴) or Luke and John (P⁷⁵). Otherwise there are individual codices of Matthew (6), Luke (3), and John (10). Mark is represented only in the context of a four gospel codex, but some of the surviving fragments of the Egerton Gospel and the (Greek) Gospels of Thomas, Peter, and Mary reflect a codex format. Especially striking is the existence of five codices of the *Shepherd of Hermas* – an indication of this text's popularity and proto-canonical status, although other copies exist in roll form.

This Christian preference for the codex over the roll may be compared and contrasted with wider trends in contemporary book-production. Using information drawn largely from the *Leuven Database of Ancient Books*, Larry Hurtado has calculated that only 1.5% of the 1044 surviving first century manuscripts were codices, whereas 77.5% were rolls.⁷ Indeed the figure for rolls was probably higher, as many of the remaining manuscripts are too

⁵ C. H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex*, London: OUP for the British Academy, 1987, pp. 15-23.

⁶ The indicative figures given here are based on the catalogue of biblical papyri in Larry W. Hurtado, *The Oldest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006, pp. 209-29.

⁷ Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, pp. 44-49, 90-93.

fragmentary to determine their original format. Assuming that early Christians were already using codices in the first century, they did so in conscious defiance of the overwhelming cultural preference for the roll. The balance between rolls and codices shifts, however, in subsequent centuries: 74% rolls, 5% codices in the second century, 56% rolls and 21% codices in the third, 38% rolls and 56% codices in the fourth. The rise of Christianity to its fourth century cultural dominance is coextensive with the rise of the codex.

In seeking to explain the remarkable early Christian preference for the (as yet) unfashionable codex, it would be a mistake to over-emphasize its counter-cultural dimension. The codex was not a Christian invention. In some form or other it was already available to be exploited, and examples of its general use can help to establish a context for its adoption by Christians. Paul was not the only author who valued his *membranai*.

2. *The Use of the Codex*

Writing in Rome towards the end of the first century, two Spanish authors have occasion to speak of the codex and its uses: Quintilian the rhetorician and Martial the satirist.

In the tenth of the twelve books of his *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian devotes a chapter to the role of writing in relation to public speaking in the law courts or elsewhere. The public discourse will not itself be read from a text but performed as though extempore, yet careful preparation is needed if the speech is to be clear, coherent, and persuasive. Among other matters, Quintilian considers what is the best medium for this preliminary writing:

There are certain lesser points – though in study nothing is unimportant – which should not be overlooked. It is best to write on wax tablets [*ceris*], which make deletion easier, unless indeed poor eyesight makes it necessary to use parchments [*membranarum*]. While these aid vision, they delay the hand by the constant to and fro of pen to inkwell, breaking up the continuity of thought. Whichever medium is used, however, some pages [*tabellae*] should be left blank so that additional material can be freely added. For lack of space makes one reluctant to make corrections, and will certainly produce confusion in the old when new material is inserted.⁸

⁸ *Inst. or.* x.3.31-32 (Quintilian [Marcus Fabius Quintilianus], *The Orator's Education*, ed. D. A. Russell, Loeb Classics, 5 vols., Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2003). Here and elsewhere, translations are my

The *cerae* are thin rectangles of wood with a margin enclosing a wax-filled hollow in which one writes with a stylus. Letters become visible as the darker wooden background is exposed beneath the lighter wax.⁹ For better visibility, parchment, pen, and ink are also available. The stylus has the advantage over the pen that it allows for continuous writing without having to be constantly recharged with ink; allusion is made here to the technical problem to which the fountain pen was a belated and temporary solution. Wax has the further advantage over ink on parchment that it allows for instant erasure. The “pages” or *tabellae* are primarily the wax-filled “boards”, although the term also covers the analogous pieces of parchment. Quintilian’s recommendation that pages be left blank indicates that the wood-and-wax artefact and its parchment equivalent are purchased in made-up rather than loose-leaf form, with a specific number of leaves securely bound together. These objects are notebooks rather than individual writing tablets. New pages cannot easily be inserted to accommodate new matter, so *recto* pages must be set aside for future additions to their *verso* opposite numbers. The fact that the key terminology is all plural – *cerae*, *membranae*, *tabellae* – indicates that the singularity and continuity of the roll is the norm and that writing on separate pieces of material is simply a matter of convenience. The key practical advantage of this notebook format is that one always has immediate access to every part of one’s drafts or notes, without having to scroll laboriously from one section to another.

In the anecdote that follows the codex notebook is found in a classroom setting:

I recommend that the wax tablets [*ceras*] should not be unduly wide, having once had an otherwise able student who wrote at inordinate length because he measured his compositions by counting the lines. Repeated admonitions failed to correct this fault, and it was only put right by replacing his writing tablets [*mutatis codicibus*].¹⁰

A *codex* or *caudex* is initially a block of wood, and the term is retained when the block is sawn into tablets which are then hollowed out to receive the wax. Once again Quintilian uses

own. On writing tablets and notebooks, see Roberts and Skeat, *Birth of the Codex*, pp. 15-23; Graham N. Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospel*, Cambridge: CUP. 2004, pp. 173-78.

⁹ Of the 180 tables of this type found in the Vindolanda excavations near Hadrian’s wall, many “contain remains of incised texts, often palimpsests, which have survived where the metal stilus penetrated the wax coating on the wooden surface below” (Alan K. Bowman, *Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier: Vindolanda and its People*, London: British Museum, 2003³, p. 8).

¹⁰ *Inst. or.* x.3.33.

a plural term (*codices*), referring to the notebook by way of its leaves or pages. Since *tabellae*, “boards”, can be extended to refer to the pages of a parchment notebook, the same may also be true of *codices*. Evidently these bound *codices* are easy to obtain and may be purchased in a variety of sizes and formats. Their use is varied and flexible: they are essential equipment both for the student in the classroom and for the professional politician or lawyer as he prepares his public discourses. In their parchment form, they also have the advantage of closer resemblance to a standard book: one does not unroll them, but they are written in ink on the same material as might be found in a roll. A text inscribed in wood-and-wax tablets would hardly be saleable, but the reading public might be willing to purchase a text in parchment codex format. That at least was the view of Quintilian’s contemporary, the poet Martial, who marketed his own and others’ literary works in codex editions.

Introducing his books of epigrams, Martial claims that their codex format makes them more portable than conventional rolls:

Qui tecum cupis esse meos ubicumque libellos
et comites longae quaeris habere viae,
hos eme, quos artat breuibis membrana tabellis:
scrinia da magnis, me manus una capit.¹¹

If you want my books to be with you everywhere,
And are looking for companions for a long journey,
Buy these, confined within small parchment pages.
Keep your book-boxes for large volumes – a single hand can hold me!

A parchment or papyrus codex is written on both sides of the page, whereas a roll is written on one side only. A roll must be held in both hands, a codex may be held in just one. Martial claims that his miniature codices make more text available with less effort. He also provides the name and address of the bookseller where they may be obtained. It may have been the same bookseller who published parchment codex editions of classics such as Homer, Cicero, Livy, Virgil, and Ovid, for each of which Martial provided an introductory epigram. On Livy he writes:

¹¹ Martial, *Epigrams*, i.2 (Loeb Classics, 2 vols., London: Heineman, New York: Putnam, 1919).

Pellibus exiguis artatur Livius ingens,
quem mea non totum bibliotheca capit.¹²

Into scant parchment pages great Livy is crammed,
whom, entire, my library could not contain.

Martial's Livy edition is perhaps an abridgement or a selection. What is important for our purposes is that the late first century codex can encompass the entire range from the school exercise-book to editions of literary classics. It is used primarily as a notebook, but it is also possible to publish literary texts in this format when the medium is parchment or papyrus rather than wood and wax.

This versatility of the codex may prove to be an important factor in its enthusiastic adoption by Christians. Tracing the Christian use of the codex back to its origins is a necessary preliminary to the more important task of assessing its significance for Christian canonical hermeneutics.

3. *Writing the Gospel Tradition*

By the end of the first century, it was possible to publish literary texts in codex format. If Christian gospel texts were initially published as codices, that would not itself have been an anomaly. What is anomalous is the *exclusive* use of the codex. As Harry Gamble notes:

[T]here must have been a decisive, precedent-setting development in the publication and circulation of early Christian literature that rapidly established the codex in Christian use, and it is likely that this development had to do with the religious authority accorded to whatever Christian document(s) first came to be known in codex form.¹³

¹² Martial, *Epigrams*, xiv.190 (cf. xiv.184, entitled *Homerus in pugillaribus membranis*; xiv.186, *Vergilius in membranis*; xiv.188 [Cicero], 192 [Ovid]).

¹³ Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995, p. 58.

The problem then is to identify the earliest Christian use of the codex and to explain why it set such a decisive precedent for later Christian text-production. The Gospel of Mark and the Pauline letter collection have each been proposed as possible candidates for this precedent-setting role.¹⁴ Yet there is no reason to ascribe the original use of the codex to a specific part of the New Testament, as though there had been no Christian writing before Mark or Paul's editor.

There is good reason to suppose that, long before Mark, collections of Jesus' sayings were in use as aids to preaching and teaching.¹⁵ These should not be identified with the hypothetical "Q" document. The Q hypothesis rightly finds it implausible that Jesus' sayings were transmitted in purely oral form over four or more decades, but it is dependent on the questionable assumption that Luke's Gospel *cannot* reflect any awareness of Matthew's. If Luke may plausibly be shown to have drawn, selectively and critically, from Matthew as well as Mark, then Q in its conventional form simply vanishes.¹⁶ Evidence for the existence of early sayings collections is to be found elsewhere.

While the *Gospel of Thomas* shows an awareness of passages from Matthew and Luke, its non-narrative format is entirely independent of the canonical narrative gospels.¹⁷ Most sayings are introduced and differentiated by the simple formula, "Jesus said..." They may be linked by catchwords, but there is little or no sequential development. This text is best seen not as a unique and isolated phenomenon but as a relatively late and theologically developed descendant of primitive Christian collections of Jesus' sayings. The canonical evangelists will also have drawn from such sayings collections, accommodating their contents to their own continuous narratives. Sayings collections must also underlie texts such as *2 Clement*, where Jesus' sayings occur in distinctive forms and combinations:

¹⁴ For a survey of scholarly views on this, see Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, pp. 61-83.

¹⁵ See my *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013, pp. 217-85.

¹⁶ Watson, *Gospel Writing*, pp. 117-216; Mark Goodacre, *The Case against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem*, Harrisburg, PA: TPI, 2002.

¹⁷ Thomas's familiarity especially with Matthew and Luke is ably and independently demonstrated by Simon Gathercole and Mark Goodacre (Simon J. Gathercole, *The Composition of the Gospel of Thomas: Original Language and Influences*, SNTSMS, Cambridge: CUP, 2012; Mark Goodacre, *Thomas and the Gospels: The Case for Thomas's Familiarity with the Synoptics*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

The Lord said, If you are gathered to my breast but do not obey my commandments, I will throw you out and say to you, Depart from me, I do not know where you are from, you workers of iniquity.¹⁸

The saying is obviously related to canonical material in Matthew and Luke, but it is nevertheless quite distinct from it. The introductory formula, “the Lord said...” closely resembles the “Jesus said” of the *Gospel of Thomas*, suggesting that in both cases the ultimate source is an early sayings collection. These collections will have been anonymous, a tradition preserved in the canonical gospels. If they bore a title at all, it may simply have been “Gospel”. Thus the author of 2 *Clement* introduces another of his noncanonical citations with the formula, “The Lord says in the gospel...” (8.5). If primitive sayings collections were headed “Gospel”, that would account for the opening of Mark: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mk.1.1). While *euaggelion* is not used at all by Luke and John, it is nevertheless firmly established as the generic term for all written tradition relating to Jesus. If Mark and other gospels incorporate the contents of primitive sayings collections, this suggest a solution to the problem of the Christian preference for the codex. As we have seen, the parchment or papyrus codex of the late first century is beginning to display its potential versatility. It can be used to accommodate literary texts, including new ones such as Martial’s epigram collections – a striking extension of its previous role as a notebook for various forms of personal use. It seems probable that the early Christian adoption of the codex displays a comparable range, encompassing both literary texts such as full narrative gospels and their simpler antecedents in written collections of Jesus’ sayings. The gospel itself is articulated in Jesus’ words, and these are preserved as gospel precisely as they are written down. A notebook containing Jesus’ sayings could thus become a hallowed object whose codex format was preserved as its contents were assumed into more ambitious literary structures.

4. *Time, Space, and the Codex*

If this account is correct, the Christian codex established itself not because it promoted any specific interpretative aims but because the sanctity of the earliest written tradition was

¹⁸ 2 *Clem.* 4.5.

extended to its format. And so the convention arose that gospel writing required the codex – a convention rapidly extended to the ancient scriptures and to other Christian texts.

Codex format does, however, possess *potential* hermeneutical significance, even if that was not the reason for its adoption. A codex still allows one to read its contents from beginning to end, just as one would read a roll. Neither format has any advantage over the other for “normal” linear reading practice. Yet the codex has considerable advantages for reference purposes, as every part of it is always directly accessible to the user.¹⁹ In the case of a roll, it is a laborious undertaking to return from near the end of a text to a point near the beginning, perhaps to check that one has remembered something correctly. A codex makes this easy. The relationship between two points in a codex is an immediate one; there is no need to work backwards or forwards through the intervening material. Linear or sequential reading is still straightforward, but one can now also read *across* the pages, from one point to another that may be distant yet relevant to the matter in hand. In the codex a text still unfolds through time, as with a roll. And yet the text is no longer a purely temporal entity, it is also a space, a container for the play of intertextual connections and significances.

This potential for cross-referencing can most effectively be realized when multiple biblical books are included within a single codex. The oldest extant cross-referencing system is the one developed by Eusebius of Caesarea as a framework for his single-volume edition of the four canonical gospels – a framework so popular that it spread rapidly into gospel codices in Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, and Armenian.²⁰ Eusebius identifies ten different categories of interrelation between the gospels, ranging from material shared by all four to material unique to each of them. The categories give rise to ten “canons”, tables listing enumerated parallel passages, located at or near the beginning of the volume. Corresponding enumeration is inserted in the margin of each gospel text; section numbers relate not to sense-units per se but to points where one category of interrelation gives way to another. One part of a Matthean passage may be shared with Mark and Luke (Eusebius’s second category,

¹⁹ Roberts and Skeat are too quickly dismissive of “ease of reference” as a factor in the rise of the codex (*Birth of the Codex*, pp. 50-51). “[E]ven though it may be true that practical advantages alone do not adequately explain the broad adoption of the codex in early Christianity..., those advantages cannot simply be disregarded” (Gamble, *Books and Reading*, p. 274n).

²⁰ Eusebius’s canon tables and his explanatory letter to Carpianus are printed in successive editions of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012²⁸, pp. 89*-94*). Representative and aesthetically attractive canon tables are found in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (Latin, 8th century), the *Rabbula Gospels* (Syriac, 6th century), the *Garima Gospels* (I, Coptic; II, Ethiopic; both c. 600), and the *Zeyt’un Gospels* (Armenian, 13th century).

canon II), another part with Luke alone (canon V), and the Matthean enumeration will change at the point where this relationship changes. Beneath each section number is placed a further number in red ink, indicating the canon table in which the section and its parallels in other gospels is to be found. Thus the Matthean summary of Jesus' first preaching ("Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand") is identified in Eusebius's margin as section 20 and as belonging to canon VI. Turning to the canon tables at the front of the four gospel codex, we encounter lists of section numbers in parallel columns, one for each of the gospels in question, typically located within an arcade-like structure and separated by pillar. The page containing canon VI consists in four columns, two Matthean listings alternating with two Markan ones. Near the top of the first two columns, section 20 of Matthew is aligned with section 9 of Mark, to which we may now turn to find the parallel version of Jesus' initial preaching: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand – repent and believe the gospel". It is the codex format that makes this cross-referencing system possible. The Markan parallel is many pages distant from its Matthean counterpart, and yet it is immediately available to the reader of Matthew.

A linear reading of a four gospel codex is still possible; one may very well read through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in order and from beginning to an end. This indeed is the standard reading practice in which the book – whether codex or roll – unfolds its contents in temporal sequence. The necessity of a reading-through-time is acknowledged in the Eusebius's sequential enumeration system, which locates every point in the text on a continuum between its beginning and its end. Yet the primary role of the canon tables is to promote an account of the four gospels as a single *space* for the play of their complex intertextuality. This point may be further emphasized by the use of architectural imagery: columns with their bases and capitals, the lower arcade and the upper arch that links them, a structure that unites the solid earth with the dome of heaven. To fulfil its intended function, a canon table not only guides the user from one text to its counterparts but is itself a symbolic representation of the canonical gospel construct in its intricate order and harmony. In these pages the user *sees* the four gospel structure simultaneously and as a whole. This architecture is functional but it is also a work of art. The space that enables this architecture is the space of the codex.

5. *The Scriptures and the Book*

In his *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius recounts how the Emperor Constantine commissioned him to prepare “fifty parchment copies... of the sacred writings that you know to be most urgently necessary for the provision and use of the church and its teaching”.²¹ The reference here is not to single volume Bibles, as it often supposed, but to copies of scriptural texts that Eusebius is himself to select as most important for the new churches that Constantine proposes to build in Constantinople. Even in the fourth century, however, the whole of Christian scripture could be accommodated within a single codex, as *Codex Vaticanus* and *Codex Sinaiticus* demonstrate. In the one case, each double page spread contains six columns, in the other, eight, mimicking the appearance of a roll while demonstrating the codex’s capacity to absorb almost unlimited quantities of material. In these manuscripts the plurality of the “holy scriptures” anticipates the singularity of the book we now know as “the Bible”. It was the codex that made this singularity possible, long before the invention of printing.²² The question is how this capacious container of the sacred texts shapes the way they are read.

Around the middle of the sixth century, the ageing Cassiodorus composed his *Institutiones Divinarum et Saecularium Litterarum*.²³ After a career as a minister at the court of Theodoric the Ostrogoth in Ravenna, Cassiodorus returned south to his country estate at Scyllacium where he founded a monastery noted for its well-stocked fish-ponds and its equally well-stocked library.²⁴ Book one of the *Institutions* is in effect a systematized and annotated library catalogue, doubling as an educational programme. This library contains eight bookcases with books in Greek in the eighth and Latin works in the other seven.²⁵

²¹ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, iv.36: πεντήκοντα σωμάτια ἐν διφθέραις... τῶν θείων δηλαδὴ γραφῶν ὧν μάλιστα τὴν τ’ ἐπισκευὴν καὶ τὴν χρῆσιν τῷ τῆς ἐκκλησίας λόγῳ ἀναγκαίαν εἶναι γινώσκεις (Greek text in *Eusebius Werke*, Band 1.1, ed. F. Winkelmann, GCS, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1991²). A reference here to single volume Bibles would deprive the relative clause of any real function. Constantine did not send Eusebius an order for “fifty new Bibles”, as David L. Dungan claims (*Constantine’s Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament*, London: SCM, p. 121). Gamble rightly notes the practical impossibility of any such request (*Books and Readers*, pp. 79-80).

²² Portable and affordable single-volume Bibles, “small enough to comfortably fit into a large pocket or small satchel”, were already in widespread use during the 13th century (so Eyal Poleg and Laura Light, “Introduction”, in *Form and Function in the Late Medieval Bible*, ed. E. Poleg and L. Light, Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp.1-7; p. 2)

²³ *Cassiodori Senatoris Institutiones*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors, Oxford: Clarendon, 1937. An English translation is available which unfortunately tends to translate the key term *codices* as “sections” (i.e. of the Bible), a concept for which Cassiodorus actually uses the term *divisio*. James W. Halporn and Mark Vessey (ed.), *Cassiodorus Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning, and, On the Soul*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004, p. 109 and passim.

²⁴ For Cassiodorus’s life and work, see James J. O’Donnell, *Cassiodorus*, Berkeley: University of California, 1979.

²⁵ *Inst.* i.8.15, 14.4.

Distributed between these seven bookcases are nine codices containing the scriptures of the Old and New Testament.²⁶ The first codex is devoted to the “Octateuch”, from Genesis to Ruth. Four books of Kings and two of Chronicles follow in the second, the Psalms in the third, works attributed to Solomon in the fourth: not only Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs but also the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus. The fifth codex, containing the prophets, was probably the largest of the nine, closely followed by the first. The sixth codex is devoted to texts that Cassiodorus describes as *hagiographa*, borrowing the term from Jerome although several of the texts it contains are outside the limits of Jerome’s canon: Tobit, Judith, two books of Maccabees, and 1 Esdras as well as the securely canonical Job, Esther, and Ezra. Codices seven, eight, and nine contain respectively the four gospels, the apostolic letters, and Acts and Revelation – this last a surprising juxtaposition for which Cassiodorus finds a precedent in Augustine.²⁷ Along with each of these scriptural codices Cassiodorus has assembled a collection of commentaries, which he compares to Jacob’s Ladder, enabling their readers to scale the scriptural heights.²⁸

The library also contains three further codices that Cassiodorus calls *pandects*, all-containing: these are copies of scripture in a single volume, one in Greek and therefore located in the eighth bookcase, and two in Latin. The first Latin volume is based on Jerome, especially his translation of the Hebrew Old Testament.²⁹ Cassiodorus was involved in the preparation of this volume, which he sought to make as compact as possible by means of small handwriting. Its Old Testament is said to contain just 22 books, corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet; this figure results from Jerome’s restriction to the Hebrew canon and from counting pairs or groups of books as a single book. In contrast, the second Latin volume is described as the “larger codex written in clear lettering” (*codex grandior littera clariore conscripto*).³⁰ Its Old Testament translation is from the Septuagint and includes 44 books. This *codex grandior* contained 70 scriptural books, 44 in the Old Testament section, 26 in the New. The Greek pandect contained 75 books.³¹ The contents of

²⁶ The *novem codices* are introduced in *Inst.* i, *praef.* 8, 10, and the following chapters are devoted to each of them in turn and to their accompanying patristic commentaries (*Inst.* i.1-9; cf. also i.11.3, 13.2). The fifth codex (the prophets) is dealt with out of sequence in the third chapter, probably under the influence of Jerome’s organization of the Old Testament canon (cf. *Inst.* i.12.1).

²⁷ Cassiodorus, *Inst.* i.9.1, 13.1-2 (Augustine, *De Doct. Chr.* ii.8.13).

²⁸ *Inst.* i, *praef.* 2.

²⁹ *Inst.* i.12.1-3.

³⁰ *Inst.* i.14.1-2.

³¹ *Inst.* i.14.4.

these pandects may differ, but the total figures all have symbolic significance. The 49 books of the smaller Latin pandect recalls the Jubilee year; the 70 books of the larger one are prefigured in the 70 palm trees in the oasis at Elim (Ex.15.27); and the 75 books of the Greek pandect recall both the number of descendants of Jacob who find refuge in Egypt (Gen.46.27) and Abraham's age at the time of his call (Gen.12.4).³²

Alongside these three pandects, the nine codex edition of scripture should also be seen as a singular entity. It contains 71 books, the ones contained in Augustine's canon although not in the same order. If the divine unity is added to 71, we arrive at 72: a number whose symbolic significance Cassiodorus asserts but does not explain.³³ There are then four copies of scripture in this library, all different, three in single volume format and the fourth distributed over nine co-ordinated codices. These all-encompassing codices are precursors of "the Bible" as we know it, and the question is how they will tend to shape the way the canonical texts are read.

In the first instance, a singular "Bible" requires clear decisions about inclusion and exclusion. If holy scripture occurs in the form of multiple individual codices, no sharp differentiation is required from other ancient and edifying texts located perhaps in the same bookcase: we recall those five early copies of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, referred to above. Cassiodorus's embarrassment at the differences between his pandects would not have been necessary if each of the books they contain came in its own codex.

A singular Bible has a certain homogenizing effect on the texts it contains. In Cassiodorus's description of his nine codices, there is a seamless transition from volume six (Old Testament *hagiographa* such as Job and Esther) to volume seven (the four gospels). The gospels are of course more significant than Job or Esther, yet these are essentially texts of the same kind. The status differential between scriptural texts is reduced. An overwhelming preference for Matthew or John over Mark may be maintained so long as those texts circulate as individual codices, but Mark will not be so easily overlooked once safely installed in a four-gospel or whole-Bible codex. Users of such volumes will experience a pressure to read and familiarize themselves with their entire contents, since a book only partially read represents an unfinished task.

A singular Bible means that all scriptural texts are readily accessible. In the early eighth century, Cassiodorus's pandects were to inspire the monastic scriptoria at Wearmouth-

³² *Inst.* i.12.2; 14.2, 4.

³³ *Inst.* i.13.2.

Jarrow to produce three pandects of their own.³⁴ One was intended as a gift to the Pope. (This is now known as *Codex Amiatinus*, the oldest surviving complete single-volume Bible and the main exemplar for printed editions of the Latin Vulgate from the sixteenth century onwards.)³⁵ The other two pandects were intended to be permanently available for consultation in the Northumbrian monastery's twin churches of St Peter and St Paul, "so that" (as an anonymous contemporary historian puts it) "everyone wishing to read some specific chapter from either Testament would easily find what they wanted".³⁶

A singular Bible also requires decisions about the order and structuring of the scriptural texts. This is the point that causes Cassiodorus the most difficulty as he contemplates his nine codex edition and his pandects. Should one follow Jerome's preference for the normal Jewish arrangement, in which the law is followed by the "former" and "latter" prophets, that is, the historical books from Joshua to 2 Kings and the prophetic books from Isaiah to Malachi? The tendency of such an arrangement is to highlight the links between the prophets and Israel's history, and so to historicize them. Or, following Augustine, should one gather all the historical or narrative books into a single sequence? Books such as Chronicles and Esther may be read differently if one assigns them to the category of history rather than edifying literature. Within the New Testament, locating Acts immediately before Revelation and not as a sequel to the gospels is likely to alter and perhaps downgrade its significance. Finally, a singular Bible will require a degree of consistency in its format. In the exemplars he uses for his nine codices, Cassiodorus finds some manuscripts that present the text without any subdivisions, others that introduce numbered sections with headings. Cassiodorus's preference is to gather these headings together and to insert them as a table of contents at

³⁴ This is reported in Bede's *History of the Abbots* (15), and in a closely related anonymous work of the same title (15, 37). Latin texts in C. Plummer (ed.), *Venerabilis Baedae Historiam ecclesiasticam gentis Anglorum, Historiam abbatum, Epistolam ad Ecgberhtum, una cum Historia abbatum auctore anonymo*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1896. The Northumbrian pandects contained the "new translation" (Bede, *Hist. abb.* 15), that is, Jerome's translation from the Hebrew (Anon, *Hist. abb.* 37) together with his edition of the gospels. The monastery already possessed a pandect copy of the "old translation", which Abbot Ceolfrith had brought from Rome and which may be related to Cassiodorus's *codex grandior* (Bede, *Hist. abb.* 15). English translations of the two short histories are available in *The Age of Bede (Revised Edition)*, ed. J. F. Webb and D. F. Farmer, Penguin Classics, London: Penguin Books, 1998.

³⁵ Of the oldest Greek Bibles, the 4th century *Codex Vaticanus* has lost its beginning (Gen.1-46) and end (the Pastorals, Philemon, Revelation). *Codex Sinaiticus* (also 4th century) survives only in fragments in the books that precede the Psalms. *Codex Alexandrinus* (5th century) is more nearly intact but its four volumes resemble Cassiodorus's *novem codices* more closely than his pandects.

³⁶ Anon, *Hist. abb.* 15.

the start of a book, providing them himself where they are lacking in his manuscripts.³⁷ A single volume Bible is subject to extensive editorial interventions of this kind.

In Cassiodorus's great pandects, the codex has developed out of all recognition from the simple notebooks that the fictive Paul of the Pastorals hopes shortly to recover. When the Pastoral Epistles were composed, almost all the scriptural texts that make up those pandects were already in circulation, and canonical or proto-canonical status was already ascribed to many of them. Yet there are profound differences between these texts considered as individual artefacts and as incorporated into an encyclopedic collection, just as there are profound differences between a text formatted as a codex or a roll. "The Bible " as we know it is the result not just of authorial activity, divinely inspired or otherwise, but also of evolving techniques of book production.

³⁷ *Inst.* i.1.10, 2.13, 5.7, 6.5.